

Pandemic Influenza Fact Sheet

What is Pandemic Influenza?

Influenza, or flu, is a viral infection of the lungs. There are two main types of influenza virus, A and B. Each type includes many different strains and new strains emerge periodically. Influenza outbreaks occur most often in late fall and winter.

Pandemic influenza is a global outbreak of disease that occurs when a new influenza A virus appears in humans, causes serious illness and then spreads easily from person to person worldwide.

Whats the difference between a pandemic and a seasonal outbreak of flu?

A pandemic is caused by a new influenza A virus that most people have never been exposed to, so everyone is susceptible. Pandemic strains also often cause more serious disease. Because of this, past influenza pandemics have led to high levels of illness, death, social disruption and economic loss.

Seasonal outbreaks of flu are caused by strains of influenza virus similar to those of past years. Some people may have built up immunity, and there is also a vaccine for each years flu season.

When is the next influenza pandemic expected?

Three pandemics occurred in the 20th century, all of which spread around the world within one year of being detected. Of these, the pandemic of 1918-1919 was the most severe, with 50 million or more deaths worldwide.

No one can predict when a pandemic might occur, but many scientists believe it is only a matter of time before the next one arises. Experts from around the world are watching the H5N1 avian (bird) influenza situation in Asia very closely and are preparing for the possibility that the virus may begin to spread more easily and widely from person to person.

What is Virginia doing to address pandemic flu?

In Virginia , pandemic flu planning efforts have been underway for several years. A draft pandemic flu response plan was developed in 2002 that gives Virginia a template for dealing with this issue.

Recently, the Virginia Department of Health has led efforts to create a Pandemic Flu Advisory Team comprising representation from the fields of public health, private industry, law enforcement, government and the private health care industry to lead the Commonwealths preparedness efforts. This team began meeting in 2005 to develop additional strategies and enhance Virginia s pandemic flu response plans. Virginia is also working closely with national and other state partners to coordinate our efforts.

VDH is leading public information efforts to raise awareness of this issue and to help Virginians better understand the complex issues that will arise if pandemic flu becomes a reality. These include prioritizing who will receive scarce medications and vaccine supplies and how a pandemic will impact the daily activities we all take for granted such as having to close schools or cancel sporting events and large public gatherings during a pandemic.

What risks do Virginians face due to the Asian bird flu?

The current risk to Virginians from the H5N1 bird flu outbreak in Asia is low. The strain of H5N1 virus found in Asia has not been found in the United States . There have been no human cases of H5N1 flu in the United States . It is possible that travelers returning from affected countries in Asia could be infected, though the risk of this type of transmission to the United States is relatively small because the rate of illness in affected countries is still very low. Since February 2004, medical and public health personnel have been watching closely to find any such cases.

What risks do Virginians face if there is a pandemic of flu?

If a new and severe strain of flu were to begin spreading across the globe, Virginia would not be spared from its impact. The severity of the next pandemic cannot be predicted, but modeling studies suggest that its effect in the United States could be severe. In the absence of any control measures (vaccination or drugs), it has been estimated that in the United States a mediumlevel pandemic could cause:

- 89,000 to 207,000 deaths
- 314,000 and 734,000 hospitalizations
- 18 to 42 million outpatient visits
- 20 to 47 million people becoming sick
- An economic impact ranging between \$71.3 and \$166.5 billion

In Virginia , pandemic flu impact estimates include:

- 2,700 to 6,300 deaths
- 12,000 to 28,500 hospitalizations
- 575,000 to 1.35 million outpatient visits
- 1.08 million to 2.52 million people becoming sick

Influenza pandemics are different from many of the threats for which public health and the health-care system are currently planning:

- The pandemic will last much longer than most other emergency events and may include waves of influenza activity separated by months (in 20 th century pandemics, a second wave of influenza activity occurred three to 12 months after the first wave).
- The numbers of health-care workers and first responders available to work can be expected to be reduced as they will be at high risk of illness through exposure in the community and in health care settings, and some may have to miss work to care for ill family members.
- Resources in many locations could be limited because of how widespread an influenza pandemic would be.

Does a flu shot protect against pandemic influenza?

Current flu vaccines will not protect against a new pandemic strain of influenza virus. Because it takes several months to develop and distribute vaccine for a new strain, a vaccine probably would not be available in the early stages of a pandemic. If a pandemic occurs, it is expected that the U.S. government will work with many partner groups to make recommendations to guide the early use of vaccine.

Are there any other treatments for pandemic flu?

Antiviral medications can be used to treat and/or prevent influenza A viruses. However, influenza strains can become resistant to antiviral medications. For example, only one antiviral medication works against the H5N1 avian influenza virus identified in human patients in Asia in 2004 and 2005. The supply of this antiviral medication is very limited worldwide, and no pharmaceutical company in the United States manufactures it.

What else can be done to minimize the risk of pandemic influenza?

Stop the spread of germs

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when coughing or sneezing
- Wash hands thoroughly and often
- Avoid touching eyes, nose or mouth
- Stay home when you are sick
- Learn more and stay informed
 - For more flu facts from VDH, visit <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/epi/fluf.doc> and click on Influenza.
 - Visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for the latest information on avian flu and pandemic flu <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/gen-info/pandemics.htm>.
 - To learn more about development of an avian flu vaccine, [click here](#).
 - If you plan to travel to Southeast Asia , click here for CDC travel